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THE IMPACT OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM ON THE MIDDLE EAST

by

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ABSTRACT

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Nuclear weapons are controversial and recent events have thrust Iran into the nuclear spotlight. These weapons in the hands of the fanatic regime in Tehran will grant them a membership card in the open nuclear club. They will become the ninth member, along with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, India, Pakistan, and North Korea. This would devastate the stability of nuclear nonproliferation in the world and drastically increase the risk of nuclear war by opening the floodgates through which Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others could flow. The Iranians, as well as other Islamic fanatics, have missile delivery systems and much of the knowledge required to develop nuclear weapons.

Nothing can stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons this decade. This paper will explore the impact of the Iranian nuclear program on the Middle East.

THE IMPACT OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM ON THE MIDDLE EAST

The United States and its allies have failed to dissuade Iran from pursuing its long-sought goal of attaining a nuclear weapons capability. Strong international pressure in October 2003 forced Iran to temporarily freeze its uranium enrichment operations and submit to increased inspections of its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Teheran's concessions staved off international sanctions and allowed them to engage the European Union through diplomatic negotiations. Teheran maintained a "charade" of sincerity during negotiations, effectively delaying progress until international opinion had shifted to its favor. They now seem to believe that they are in a much stronger position due to the continued need for U.S. military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, rising oil prices, increased bargaining leverage with oil imports, and its diplomatic cultivation of China's and Russia's influence with resolution brought before the United Nation Security Council. Iran's new president is firmly committed to Iran's nuclear program and remains determined to develop a complete nuclear fuel cycle which would eventually give it fissionable material for nuclear weapons.¹ This paper will address Iran's recent history and missile capabilities to determine reasons why Iran desires nuclear weapons and how an Iranian nuclear program will affect the region. I will analyze how far Iran is from reaching its goal and what my recommendations are to stop this threat to global security and stability.

Iran Recent History

The Islamic Republic of Iran, formally known as Persia in the west, is a large country in Western Asia whose modern territory is in the Middle East, central Asia and the Caucasus. Its geographical area equals the size of the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Germany combined. Iran is one of the world's oldest continuous major civilizations. Iran was the first democratic regime in the region from 1953 until 1979, when protests against the Shah culminated in the Iranian revolution. The Shah fled the country after Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile and eventually succeeded in taking power. Over 98% of the population voted for establishing an Islamic Republic. The Khomeini Islamic state instated conservative Islamic laws and unprecedented levels of direct clerical rule. On September 22 1980, Iraq invaded Iran at Khuzestan, precipitating the Iran Iraq War. By 1982, Iranian forces managed to push them back into Iraq, although the war continued for six more years' until 1988. Tens of thousands of Iranian civilians and military personal were killed when Iraq used chemical weapons, making Iran second only to Japan in how it has been affected by weapons of mass destruction. Iran's population increased dramatically during the later half of the twentieth

century, reaching about 70 million by 2006. More than two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, with a literacy rate of 86%. Most Iranians are Moslem, of which 90% belong to the Shi'a branch of Islam.² Today Iran is a theocracy dominated by an appointed clerical supreme leader and a council of guardians and it is also blessed with bountiful economic resources.

The Iranian Missile Program

Alongside their nuclear infrastructure, Iran's missile program is especially troubling for world security. The development of a missile industry in parallel with the quest for nuclear technology suggests they may be linked and that the missiles are intended as delivery systems for nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction warheads. Iran relies on the development of missile technology to reflect its status as a regional power. They claim to be developing missiles to send a satellite into orbit for peaceful purposes, but this would imply using a multistage missile that Iran has yet to fully develop. A multistage missile will certainly have military implications. The strategy of targeting states is not new, however the 21st century has given this threat new meaning³. Ballistic and the cruise missile are in the hands of extreme regimes and are spreading all over the world. Many states have low flying cruise missiles with typical ranges of 500 kilometers. Short range ballistic and cruise missiles can provide Iran with the capability to strike all over the world, from Asia to the Middle East. In this respect, Iran is the most powerful country in the Middle East. It has the ability to strike targets throughout the region and in Europe. Iran distributes its missiles through region to countries such as Syria and Lebanon. Their Shahab missiles have ranges anywhere from 150 km to 2000 km. It would be imprudent to assume that Iran will not mature technically or that its missile program has no relationship to the development of a nuclear infrastructure. While both programs could have other uses, they also constitute significant investments in what could become an integrated nuclear weapons and delivery system. Unlike air power, missiles decouple destructive capacity from military capability. During his reciprocal visit to Venezuela in September 2006, Iranian president Ahmanijad raised the issue of deploying Shahab-3 missiles to Venezuela and Cuba in order to threaten the U.S..⁴.

How Close is Iran to Building A-Bomb?

Iran's nuclear program began under the Shah in 1974, but was abruptly suspended following the Islamic revolution in 1978-79.⁵ The Shah also conducted research in the production of fissionable material, but these efforts were also suspended during the revolution and throughout the Iran-Iraq war. It was not until 1984 that Ayatollah Khomeini revived Iran's nuclear weapons program. There are some indications that he did so reluctantly because he

viewed these weapons as immoral. In 1987 and 1988, the reactor sites at Bushehr I and II were damaged by Iraqi air strikes and progress was again arrested. Since the arrival of the Ahmanigad presidency, Iran's nuclear policy has hardened and become more confrontational in nature. They believe that Iran should align itself with Asia rather than the West.

Few doubt Iran's intention to develop a covert nuclear weapons program, yet the evidence suggests that its applied military research program remains in its preliminary stages. Most analysts agree that Iran is not able to fund or staff a program equal to that which existed in Iraq prior to the Gulf War. Reports from Russian technicians with experience in Iran indicate that even the civilian nuclear program lacks cohesion and is marked by technical deficiencies⁶. Absent a more capable nuclear infrastructure, or a covert input of fissionable material from a foreign source, it appears that the Iranian focus remains on developing military research capabilities. Such an approach allows for a practical military program to be rapidly instituted at a more opportune time. This approach also allows Iran to walk a fine line of legality where international safeguards and controls are concerned.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed Elbarradei, determined that "Iran has been developing a nuclear fuel cycle. Have they taken the step from that into weaponization? We have not seen that. But I am not yet excluding that possibility."⁷ All that is certain about Iran's program is that the West does not have any idea how far Teheran has advanced in its bid to achieve nuclear weapons capability. However we can understand how Iranian leaders view nuclear weapons. Ali Rafsanjani in 1988 said:

chemical and biological weapons are poor man's atomic bombs and can easily be produced. We should at least consider them in our defense. Although the use of such weapons is inhuman, the war thought us that international laws are scarps of paper. With regard to chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons training, it was made clear during the Iran-Iraq war that these weapons are very decisive. It was also made clear that the moral teaching of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage and the world does not respect its own resolution and closes its eyes to the violation and all the aggression which are committed on the battlefield. We should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons.⁸

Right now there is a considerable amount of debate going on about the possibility of Teheran being able bring their program to the same level as Pakistan's. By its own admission to the IAEA, Iran has been working hard on this program for almost two decades. In fact, Iran's uranium enrichment program is more advanced than previously thought. According to Marshall Breit of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace: "Teheran may be only a few years away from being able to produce enough highly enriched uranium to make a nuclear weapon"⁹

Iran's defense minister, Ali Sakami, disclosed for the first time on March 10, 2004 that the Iranian military had produced centrifuges to enrich uranium. Although the nuclear program's details are difficult to discern, Iranian scientists apparently conduct research and weapons development at eight known facilities scattered throughout the country. Agreements signed with Russian officials in 1992 provided two 440 megawatt reactors to form the foundation for Iran's current weapons research programs. Other countries such as China, North Korea, France, Germany, and Great Britain have contributed specific and dual-use technologies to the burgeoning Iranian nuclear program. The new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran assesses that it will be ten years before Iran has a nuclear bomb.¹⁰ Accordingly, Iran has pursued three different methods of enriching uranium and has experimented with separating plutonium. This suggests a steady accrual of expertise in weapons-relevant areas. If Iran received the same nuclear weapon designs that A.Q. Khan gave Libya, the remaining technical hurdle (albeit the most difficult) would be fissionable material production. Therefore, the challenge is verifying that there are no undeclared enrichment facilities or capabilities. Most of Iran's effort in the enrichment area has been concentrated on centrifuge technology which Tehran is aggressively pursuing. The IAEA found that Iran repeatedly violated its safeguards agreement during an 18-year period of covert development and testing. Currently, Iran is operating a small centrifuge cascade and is conducting research and development work at a pilot facility in Natanz. This is the beginning of a much larger effort with hundreds of centrifuges at the pilot facility. Iran notified the IAEA that this fall it will begin installing the first of 3000 centrifuges at an industrial enrichment plant that is also at Natanz. Let there be no mistake that what Iran calls innocent research and development is actually the next step toward achieving a large-scale enrichment capability. Supporting this conclusion, Iran is now producing feedstock for centrifuges at a uranium conversion facility at Isfahan. Iran has already produced approximately 85 tons of uranium hexafluoride at Isfahan. If this amount of feedstock were enriched in centrifuges to weapons grade material, the result would be enough highly-enriched uranium (HEU) for about 10 nuclear weapons. Nearby, Iran has dug an underground tunnel for storing uranium hexafluoride. The facility at Isfahan is also capable of converting uranium hexafluoride to uranium metal; the form used in nuclear weapons components.¹¹ In a recent CIA briefing before the Congress, U.S. lawmakers were told in closed session that Iran was not only involved in a clandestine nuclear program, but that the country is on a fast track to producing the final product. Iran could have had its first prototype nuclear bomb ready for testing by late 2005. An Israeli source quoted by the Washington Post went further by stating that "the point of no return" could have been reached by the middle 2005¹².

Why Does Iran Want to Achieve Nuclear Bomb?

After explicitly targeting and criticizing the Sha's nuclear program as an example of the monarchy's corrupt taste for mega projects, the Islamic Republic of Iran rediscovered an interest in nuclear power in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war. Iran's view of nuclear weapons was influenced by the lessons of its war with Iraq, especially with regard to self-reliance and preparedness. The war with Iraq served as both warning and a lesson. Surprised by Iraq's attack, Iranians resolved never to be caught unprepared again. A clear and overriding lesson surely was that reliance on conventional forces for deterrence was less effective than reliance on nuclear weapons. With nuclear weapons even the most dedicated or better armed force would surely be deterred¹³. A second motive for Iran nuclear ambition is that a mixed world view of Teheran will be balanced with threats and opportunities in equal measure. A nuclear capability would give Iran the confidence to obstruct and challenge U.S. power and Western influence in the Middle East. A nuclear capability would also be an immediate guarantee against forcible regime change. The rapid U.S. victory in Iraq in 1991 contrasted with Iran's eight year inconclusive war underscored the vast military disparity in conventional power between Teheran and Washington. Iran believes they require nuclear power to counter the fact that 1998 nuclear tests in India and Pakistan were relatively unscathed by international sanctions and in a short time became accepted when each became an ally or partner of the U.S..¹⁴

Major General Yahaya Rahim Safavi and former Commander in Chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Moshen Reza'i, have contended that Israel and the U.S. were determined to destroy the Islamic revolution and that Iran had no choice but to continue its nuclear program to aggressively defend itself. Although Iran claims it does not intend to develop nuclear weapons, President Ahmanijad and others in the Arab media have suggested nuclear weapons would be a legitimate means of protecting Iran from what it sees as its greatest threats in the region: the United States and Israel. Americans have already invaded Iran's neighbor, Iraq, and the White House engages in occasional saber-rattling about Iran being part of an "Axis of Evil," and proclaiming they have no tolerance for state-sponsored terrorism. The Israelis were the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i seems to have been emboldened by the Russian refusal to take Iran's case to the Security Council. On 5 July 2004, Khamene'i warned:

We, the Iranian people, within the border of our country, will cut off any hand that harms our scientific, natural, human or technological interests. We will cut off the hand that is sent to invade and work against our people's interests. We will do this with no hesitation ... If the enemy had the audacity to harm and invade, our

blows against it will not be limited to the borders of our country ... If someone harms our people and invades, we will endanger his interests anywhere in the world.¹⁵

Khomeini's statement started off a new round of warnings to Israel and the U.S. Iranian Defense Minister Vice-Admiral Ali Shamkhani warned that Iran was not scared of sanctions because revolutionary figures were used to sanctions. He said that if there were an attack on Iran, this would mean that the IAEA had gathered intelligence on Iranian installations to prepare the ground for an attack. Shamkhani warned that in the event of an attack, Iran would abandon all of its nuclear commitments and would respond with "all our force" to an attack. Shamkhani argued that Iran had managed to develop an indigenous nuclear capability which would not be destroyed by an attack.¹⁶

A third motivation for Iran to build a nuclear bomb is their regional ambitions. Iran seeks to become the indispensable power in the Middle East. Dealing with neighbors from a position of strength and by exploiting its leverage in the region, Teheran has not abandoned Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of becoming the dominant force in the Muslim world either. Domestic economic pressures and a generally inferior posture with regional competitors dictate a defensive strategy. As the largest and the most populous country bordering the Persian Gulf, Iranian leaders believe that it is their country's natural right and destiny to dominate the geographical region and the Muslim world. Iran continues developing a sea-denial capability with missiles while cultivating the trust of the Gulf States with confidence-building measures and talk about new security arrangements. Iran also seeks to be preeminent in supporting the Palestinians while inhibiting Arab reaction to Iranian policies.

The Impact of Iranian Nuclear Weapons on the Region.

The Persian Gulf, and the Middle East, though nominally separate geographic identities, are linked fundamentally as one broad political-military region. The dynamics of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and Israel's relative military superiority, invariably affect the thinking of all the Arab and Persian communities in the region. Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range missile delivery system is likely to affect its behavior in the region. Obtaining nuclear weapons will give Iranian leaders self confidence in dealing with thorny policy issues. In this section I will provide an overview of the impact an Iranian atomic bomb would have to the Persian Gulf and Middle East countries.

Israel

The Israeli ambassador to the UN, Dan Gillerman, said on 28 October 2006 that his country welcomed the Security Council's condemnation of Ahmadinezhad's remarks, adding that the Iranian president's statement were "not only alarming and dangerous, but have actually unmasked what extremism, fundamentalism, and madness is actually part of that world-threatening regime". Moreover, Israel called for Iran's expulsion from the UN. On 1 December 2006, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that Israel would not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran. On 5 December 2006, former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said that Israel should consider pre-emptive strikes against Iran's nuclear installations. On 2 December 2006, Israel had launched an Arrow missile that successfully intercepted a mock-up of Iran's Shahab-3 missile. The test was aimed at increasing the range of the Arrow missile to enable them to fly at a higher altitude and to examine the interface between the Arrow and the American-improved Patriot missile system, which was designed to be activated in the event the Arrow failed to destroy its target. Israeli officials repeatedly said that Iran would soon pass the point of no return and that serious measures must be taken to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability. Israeli officials called on the international community to take action against Iran before it was too late¹⁷. Israeli civilian and military leaders generally have assumed for some time that Iran poses a serious, threat to Israel. All agree that Iranian nuclear ambition and its ballistic missile armed with nuclear warheads will fundamentally transform Israeli national security. Israeli defense and military officials are more pessimistic than their civilian counterparts, seeing a nuclear Iran as a prime target. Ahamanigade issued statements that "Israel must be wiped off the map", or "If the Europeans are honest they should give some of their provinces in Europe – like Germany and Austria – to the Zionists so the Zionists could establish their state in Europe, and the problem will be solved at its root..." For the first time in its history, conventional Israeli military capabilities will be inadequate to meet a threat to the very existence of the Jewish state. If in the future Iran will prove its nuclear capability, such as testing its own nuclear device, it would present Israel with several options¹⁸

- Israel could prove its own nuclear power by exposing its arsenal. Israel may believe that this action would deter Iran by making clear that far more damage would be inflicted on Iran than Israel.
- Launching a preemptive military strike. This tactic worked in 1981 when Israel attacked Iraqi nuclear sites. The problem is that Iran learned from this and dispersed the location of its nuclear facilities. Furthermore many Iranian sites are hidden in the

ground. Israel probably could degrade or delay parts of Iran's nuclear program, but it could not eliminate them.

- Israel could negotiate with Teheran as it did in the past. The problem is that the Iranians do not believe in the Israeli right to live in Israel and that the extreme Shia regime will not open the door for communications.
- To increase security cooperation with the United States. Israel will try to achieve a declaration from the U.S. of perilous consequences for Iran should it openly cross the nuclear threshold and use WMDs. This kind of declaration could allow Israel to maintain its own nuclear opacity without issuing warning of its own. This should include Israel requests for military aid, and especially ballistic missiles.

I think that Israel will wait until the last moment before it will act, however when Israel believes that this is our last chance, Israel will attack Iran, from the sea, in the air and with ballistic missiles.

The Gulf Countries

Iran is suspect in the greater Middle East and the GCC because of its efforts to export its Islamic revolution and its support for international terrorism, by offering financial, logistic, and even military support to radicalized Islamic groups. Teheran under the late Ayatollah Khomeini saw itself as the natural leader of the Muslims world. Adding long range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads would seem to give a militant Iran a very powerful edge if it chose to exercise its perceived authority to the fullest. GCC states have welcomed signs of moderation in Iran and reject any suggestion that Teheran supports terrorism, or intend to threaten them once it has developed the technology for long range missiles for WMD warheads. GCC states have shrugged off dire predictions of the danger of a nuclear Iran. If Iran will test its nuclear power, they have several options.¹⁹

- Acquire nuclear weapons. Most of the Gulf States are very rich. From past experience they allocated large sums of money in conventional weapon systems, such as aircraft, tanks, and missiles. Saudi Arabia provided much of the finance for the Pakistani nuclear program in return for rumored Pakistani commitment to provide Saudi Arabia nuclear warheads if needed, as Richard Russell speculates," the Saudis might be willing to help fund Pakistani research, development, and deployment costs for their nuclear tipped ballistic missiles in exchange for nuclear warheads."²⁰ The United Arab Emirates are very concerned about Iranian ambitions and will try to arrange strategic arms agreement with the U.S.. This agreement will include all the systems

that they need to protect their country. These two countries will do everything to restore their independence, including purchasing missiles from China.

- Creating or joining an existing nuclear umbrella could be a solution for the other Gulf countries; Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. It could be a strategic alliance with America, similar to the model of NATO. They will ensure the Americans receive oil, freedom of navigation and the option to deploy more troops in their countries. The Americans will guarantee their protection.
- A third option is that the GCC will not do anything and they will wait to see how the world reacts to an Iranian atomic bomb. This was part of their agenda when Iraq invaded to Kuwait. They may be happy to see an Israeli attack on Iran and even allow Israel to fly, or to use their territorial water.

Egypt

For many years Egypt was the leader and most powerful country in the Moslem world. Iran's nuclear ambition and its extreme regime could cause Egypt to act in the following ways:

- Do nothing; Egypt will add its voice to those Arab countries calling for the region to be a nuclear free zone, to include Israel.
- Engage Iran as a diplomatic allays to solve this problem. They may try to be a bridge between the western countries and Iran.
- Acquire nuclear-armed weapons. President Mubarak declared that Egypt wants to build nuclear facilities for energy needs. It could be part of strategic plan that Egypt will have its own nuclear capabilities in the next decade.

Turkey

According to NATO Article V all members pledge that "an armed attack against them in Europe or North America shall consider an attack against them all."²¹ A nuclear Iran would raise the stakes considerably for the fulfillment of NATO Article V pledges and may cause strategic agreements to be brokered between Israel, Turkey, and the U.S. Turkey could allow partners to use its land air and sea territories to support attacks against Iran. From my perspective, Turkey will even partner with Israel for the combined protection of Turkey and Israel.

Syria

Syria will support Iran in its nuclear ambition. Moreover if Israel were to attack Iran, Syria could attack Israel with WMD missiles. Syria will continue to support the Hezbollah and will

provide for all its needs. With Syria and the Hezbollah, Iran has the ability to deter Israel from attacking her nuclear facilities.

Jordan

For Jordan the situation is very complex. Jordan is home to lot of Palestinian refugees. This caused Jordan to remain neutral to the Iranian threat. Like Egypt, Jordan will add its voice to those Arab countries calling for region to be nuclear free zone, especially to Israel.

Recommendations

Tehran's strategy is clear: As it has since 2002, it will pursue diplomatic gambits to drive a wedge into the tentative coalition of states opposing its nuclear weapons program and stall for time while it builds its nuclear capabilities. The world must understand that in the case of Iran, deterrence is not enough. Analysis is premised on the assumption that the U.S. cannot prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.²² If the only areas of conflicting interest between Iran and the U.S. were threats posed to each others territory, deterrence alone might be sufficient. We need to use all of the national elements of power:

Diplomatic

Iran's nuclear program presents difficult policy choices for all the players involved. However we must try diplomacy first. This approach was adopted by the European Union, but for success it requires America to diplomatically engage the Iranian government. The U.S. should try to use the discussions dealing with the stability in Iraq as an icebreaker for building relations with Iran. The U.S. must see Iran as political partners and offer incentives throughout the process such as; normalization between the countries, access to technology, and economic packages.

Economic

If diplomacy does not work, sanctions should be issued against Iran. The problem is that today, the United States is practically alone in this act. For success, these efforts need to affect Iran's economy. We need to enforce the sanctions outside the U.N. framework. Tehran is counting on Moscow's veto power. We need to build an economic coalition that will assure the sanctions work. Furthermore, this action could give us the opportunity to change the regime in Teheran and support Iran's democratic opposition. Iran has a well educated group of young reformers who seek to replace the Ayatollah's regime with a democracy. The policy should include a public diplomacy campaign that will explain to the Iranian people how the regime's nuclear weapons program and hard line policies hurt their economic and national interests.

Intelligence

We need to improve intelligence on Iran's nuclear weapons and other threats such as ballistic missiles, leadership, and strategic sites in the country. We need to collect more and better intelligence on a wide range of Iranian issues. This improvement would be especially valuable if it ultimately proves necessary to use military power as a last resort to defuse Iran's potential nuclear threat. The effort of intelligence must be a coalition effort, which should include: the U.S., Israel, NATO, the GCC.

Military

This must be the last option. From my perspective, the only country that could attack Iran, and to succeed is the U.S., or possibly with NATO as a coalition force. Before the attack, countries in the Middle East, especially Israel, must improve their defensive capabilities. The U.S. and Israel need to develop as their first priority the capability to destroy incoming missiles and warheads. Furthermore it is also essential to provide an umbrella for the forces that are in the theater. U.S. should pursue a mix of air, land, and sea-based missile defense system. To attack Iranian nuclear facilities, America and coalition partners must have a good plan, combined with special operation forces, and the ability to project power fast into the region. The strikes we must seek to kill the Iranian leadership to change the regime.

Conclusions

Iran is seeking a nuclear capability that would include weapons. It sees the benefits as prestige, legitimate regional status, and a greater voice in international relations. Iran has not paid the price for its failure to disclose its nuclear activities which were discovered in 2002. It is clear that their religious hierarchy is pursuing a robust nuclear weapons option. What remains obscure is what the Iranian's propose to do with the bomb once they have it. Iran is certainly not a responsible and compliant nation. It has not shown due regard to most of the obligations and disciplines linked to the handling and control of nuclear weapons.²³ Even if Iran could be deterred from considering attacks on Israel, "to wipe it from the map" in the words of Ahmanigad, an Iranian nuclear breakout would undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria building or acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

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